Being a Caregiver [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 11/2012

Key Messages:

- The role of a caregiver will often vary depending on the situation and is likely to change over time.
- Caregiving can be both rewarding and challenging.
- Caregivers should remember to take care of themselves while providing care for the person with cancer.

Caregivers are typically family members or friends who provide important physical, practical, and emotional support to a person with cancer. Caregivers may have a range of responsibilities on a daily or as-needed basis, including providing support and encouragement, giving medications, helping manage symptoms and side effects, coordinating medical appointments and providing transportation, assisting with meals, helping with housekeeping, and handling insurance and billing issues.

Types of caregiving

There are many ways to be a caregiver. For some, it may mean providing 24-hour care. For others, it may mean researching medical information or arranging for help. Each situation is different, and no one scenario applies to all people with cancer and their families. Moreover, as the disease and treatment changes, so will the caregiver's role.

Caregivers may live in the home, share responsibilities, or care from a distance.

Live-in caregiver. One person, usually a spouse or partner, typically assumes the role of the primary or lead caregiver. However, sometimes a nearby friend or neighbor may be the caregiver. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, most caregivers live within 20 minutes of the person for whom they provide care.

Shared responsibility caregiver [3]**.** Some caregivers share the responsibility with other family members, based on who is able to best perform each of the caregiving tasks. Working with family members in times of stress is often challenging because previous family conflicts are more likely to surface or worsen. However, caring for a person with cancer can also bring families closer together.

Long-distance caregiver [4]**.** In some situations, care is managed by a family member or friend who does not live near the person with cancer. A long-distance caregiver often coordinates services by phone or by email, as well as arranges for local volunteers, friends, and colleagues to help the person with cancer. Caring for a person with cancer who lives far away is often emotionally exhausting because all of the usual caregiving worries tend to be magnified. It may also cause financial stress. However, there are steps you can take to be an effective caregiver no matter how far away you are.

The challenges and joys of caregiving

To manage the challenges of caregiving, it is important to assess all of your caregiving options [5] and find ways to take care of yourself [6] while providing care.

The challenges of caregiving may include:

- Physical and emotional stress
- Less time for personal and family life
- The need to balance job and caregiving responsibilities
- Financial stress
- Lack of privacy
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness

While it is important to address the hardships and obstacles to providing care, it is also helpful to focus on some of the fulfilling aspects of caregiving:

- Caregiving shows the person who is ill that you are committed to providing as much help and support as you can.
- Caregiving makes a difference to the quality of life and well-being of the person who is ill.
- Caregiving gives you a unique opportunity to develop or renew a relationship with the person who is ill.
- Caregiving helps set a tone of respect and caring for other family members, regardless of their situations.

To learn more, watch a video [7] about caregiving.

More Information

Tips for Caregiving [8]

How an Oncology Social Worker Can Help [9]

Young Adults Taking Care of a Parent With Cancer [10]

Parenting While Caring for a Parent With Cancer [11]

Additional Resources

National Cancer Institute: When Someone You Love is Being Treated for Cancer [12]

Family Caregiver Alliance [13]

National Alliance for Caregiving [14]

National Family Caregivers Association [15]

University of California San Francisco: Orientation to Caregiving: A Handbook for Family Caregivers of Patients with Brain Tumors [16] (PDF)

University of California San Francisco: Palliative and End-of-Life Care for Patients with Brain Tumors [17] (PDF)

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/caregiver-support/being-caregiver
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25032
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25234
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25029
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25031
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/27411
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25236
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24746
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24639
[12] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/when-someone-you-love-is-treated
[13] http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/home.jsp
[14] http://www.caregiving.org
[15] http://www.nfcacares.org/
[16] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/caregivers_handbook.pdf
[17] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/palliative_brain_tumor.pdf